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ABSTRACT

The computer modem provides an inexpensive and simple method of teaching off-campus students. A speech communication course taught across a computer based distance learning system can provide students with a quality education if the course organization facilitates teaching, if assignments require students to demonstrate mastery of the material, and if interpersonal relationships develop. The professor should establish a master file for each student, with information and a place to record grades, as each assignment is completed. Project papers may be researched by the student on Compuserve, Internet, or America Online. Students should also be given a list of the speech communication journals available in their local university library, such as "Communication Education," "Quarterly Journal of Speech," etc. The assignments should be evaluated through specific questions about concepts, sources, documentation, and application of material. Teaching by computer requires many hours of interaction and assessment, more than in a traditional classroom. The interpersonal relationship between student and teacher can be enhanced by giving the student more feedback (both positive and negative) than usual on their assignments, by responding to e-mail in a friendly voice, and by grading assignments within 72 hours. And symbols can express emotions on the printed page. The professor should always respond professionally and never apologize for a correct evaluation. The computer modem can be a wonderful channel for education. (NKA)

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DISTANCE LEARNING VIA A MODEM

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DISTANCE LEARNING VIA A MODEM

The computer modem provides an inexpensive simple method of teaching students off campus. If students want to take courses without attending class, the modem may provide the answer. Today professors can teach many subjects via this interactive technology. A course taught across a computer based distance learning system can provide students with the same quality education if the organization facilitates teaching, student assignments require students to demonstrate mastery of the material, and interpersonal relationship develop.

PROCEDURE

To keep track of the students and their assignments, the professor must organize the course well. Establish a master file for each student at the beginning of the semester. At the top or at the bottom of the file, the professor should list the course, the student's name, social security number, and any other pertinent information. Below that information, a place should be provided to record the grades for each assignment and the dates of completion. As the students complete the assignments, the dates and grades should be recorded. During the semester, both the faculty member and the students maintain a record of the students' progress. As each assignment is completed, it should be placed within this master file.

As students complete the assignment, they should e-mail them to the professor. The instructor will download them using the student's code and assignment. When the assignments are evaluated, they should be imported into the master file. The original file must be erased so that the instructor knows it has been graded. The professor's

comments can be differentiated from the student's work by using asterisks (at the beginning and the end) and capital letters. Once this assignment has been graded, it should be returned to the student.

This simple method of recording the work provides an advantage not usually present in a traditional classroom: a chronological record of the students' work. These assignments and grades may be reviewed at any time. By the end of the semester this file will contain all the assignments. This system allows both the students and the professor to keep track of the process. If the students question any comment that the professor had made at any point in the semester, the assignment may be perused again.

ASSESSMENT AND MEASUREMENT

Assignments for this type of course must require the students demonstrate all of the competencies that they would acquire in a regular classroom. Carefully select the textbook because students will refer to that source many times. Include an extensive bibliography for each assignment. Include only relevant sources. Require students to read that material to answer the questions.

The students' understanding of the material must be measured. Usually they must summarize at least part of the material. Require them to apply the material so that they are not simply reporting what they are read. For example, if they are describing a corporate culture, they should read material on corporate cultures, summarize that material, and then describe the culture of an organization by giving specific examples. Students should document what they learned about the content and the corporation. Questions should be used to guide the students through the process. Some of the assignment may resemble a take-home exam.

Even though many students may not be on campus, research papers may be required by asking students to use Compuserve, Internet, America-on-line, or some other on-line search service. Make sure that content of the paper is defined in detail. Suggest which files might be helpful. For example those searching a DIALOG system might find PSYCHINFO beneficial. Make sure that they understand that they are not to quote the abstract, but that they are to find the original articles. Give them a list of the speech communication journals available in the local university library: i.e. Southern Speech Communication Journal, Journal of Nonverbal Behavior, Western Journal of Speech, Communication Education, Communication Abstracts, Quarterly Journal of Speech, etc. Emphasize documentation.

Evaluate the assignment by asking these questions:

1) Did the student adequately explain the concepts? What parts were included and excluded?

2) Did the students use timely and appropriate sources? For example, did they use a speech journal the Reader's Digest?

3) Did the students correctly document their work?

4) How many sources did they cite from the reading list?

5) Did the students apply the material they read to real life situations?

In general, assess the students' overall understanding of the concepts. This method of teaching requires many hours of interaction and assessment. This individual interaction requires more time than teaching a traditional classroom.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP

The biggest challenge for the speech communication professor is to maintain interpersonal relationships with students he has never seen. These students must be convinced they have not lost their identities to a number.

One of the ways this relationship can be enhanced is by giving the student more feedback than usual on their assignments. Dialog with the assignments in a conversational style. Give the students positive and negative feedback. When making negative comments, explain exactly how the student can improve. Be as specific as possible so that they do not have more questions than answers. Write in a friendly voice. Encourage them by discussing the parts of the paper they wrote correctly. Use the impersonal modem to instill confidence in them. While fewer words are exchanged the comments may be read many times. This repetition may increase the clarity. Grade assignments within seventy-two hours.

If the students sends an e-mail inquiring about an assignment, respond immediately. If possible, check messages every day. Timeliness makes the students feel recognized and important. Use e-mail as written dialog. If several students ask the same question, record the answer in a computer file. Then the next time the topic is mentioned, simply download the file. Students prefer more rather than less information. If many students complain about the same problem, download the file to the entire class. Consider adding the file to the computer library or the class forum.

Some distance learning systems include teleconferencing on line. When checking e-mail messages, see if any students are on line at the same time. then send

them a message asking if they would like to chat. Students feel important when the professor initiate the interaction. Answer any questions as candidly as possible. If they make personal comments, like I bought a new puppy, respond appropriately so they feel recognized as individuals.

Forums facilitate communication among students and faculty. Use this source to inform them about new books in the library or seminars over the weekend. Forums can advertise a professor/students conference on a particular date on-line. If students want to attend, they can join the group to ask questions and to interact. Of course everyone needs fast typing skills, but students show patience toward the slower interacters. Before long, students will dialog with each other. Many of them will develop friendships via the modem.

Learn to express emotions on the printed page. Symbols can communicate emotions and humor as well as words:

:-(sadness

8-) goofy smile

:-> smile

;-) wink

:-& tongue-tied

:-o shock

:-p tongue-tied

(Kent, 1994)

Occasionally students and the professor exchange humor. Unfortunately often the receiver of the comment may not recognize the pun. So miscommunication may occur.

Not all students like distance learning classes. Some feel isolated when they do not know the professor or each other very well. Others require more direction They insist they do not get enough information via the computer. Speaking with students often on-line may solve some of these problems.

Other students relate to the faceless professor openly divulging information they would normally keep secrete. Disappointed with his grade, one student wrote, "I am irate about my last grade . . . (because) from my point of view I complied entirely with each requirement of the assignment (SIC). This student expressed his anger openly because he did not have to face the professor. When the instructor responded to this e-mail professionally indicating that his grades resulted from his failure to adequately review the literature, his communication changed.

Always respond professionally and never apologize for a correct evaluation. Be careful. Remember lawsuits
may be filed on any interaction. Always Keep a copy of the student's comment and your response. If any questions arise about what occurred, present the files as documentation.

Students may disclose personal information about themselves to the faceless professor. Some ask for advice about their private lives. The same student who wrote the first memo later wrote this one:

> Is possible for someone's senses to be so sensitive that they just overload? When I am around people (especially people I do not know) in an interpersonal setting, I have such a psychological bought (SIC) of anxiety that I feel

> I can't function, and can't remember much about what was said, Every body or eye movement stresses me, and I cannot process it. If I am in a video conference, the effect is almost as bad, but if I am in a phone conference where I do not have nonverbal queues (SIC), I am very happy, and actually receive more meaningful information than face to face contact. However once I know a group of people very well, and have gained rapport with them, I prefer face to face interaction, and can understand a great deal about what people are thinking and feeling, and whether they are comfortable or uncomfortable. To be honest, it sounds as if people I do not know bring out a sense of paranoia in me. Is there any way to help correct this type of problem, or is it related more to psychological phenomenon rather than a communication disorder (which are intertwined somewhat, I'm sure.)

This student asks a professor he has never seen to diagnose a potential psychological problem. The person without a face was approachable. Perhaps this phenomenon comments on the extreme loneliness in our society. These modem relationships will make interesting research over the next decade.

CONCLUSION

If a professor wants to teach without a classroom, to respond to the needs of a diverse community, distance learning via a modem provides a tool. Do not assume this method of teaching requires less time, grading assignment and responding to students consumes many hours. The master file provides a complete record of progress for the student and for the professor. Interesting interpersonal relations develop. The computer modem can be a wonderful channel for education.

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